Amnesty

Octavia E. Butler

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by Octavia E. Butler

The stranger-Community, globular, easily twelve feet high and wide glided down into the vast, dimly lit food production hall of Translator Noah Cannon’s employer. The stranger was incongruously quick and graceful, keeping to the paths, never once brushing against the raised beds of fragile, edible fungi. It looked, Noah thought, a little like a great, black, moss-enshrouded bush with such a canopy of irregularly-shaped leaves, shaggy mosses, and twisted vines that no light showed through it. It had a few thick, naked branches growing out, away from the main body, breaking the symmetry and making the Community look in serious need of pruning.

The moment Noah saw it and saw her employer, a somewhat smaller, better-maintained-looking dense, black bush, back away from her, she knew she would be offered the new job assignment she had been asking for.

The stranger-Community settled, flattening itself at bottom, allowing its organisms of mobility to migrate upward and take their rest. The stranger-Community focused its attention on Noah, electricity flaring and zigzagging, making a visible display within the dark vastness of its body. She knew that the

electrical display was speech, although she could not read what was said. The Communities spoke in this way between themselves and within themselves, but the light they produced moved far too quickly for her to even begin to learn the language. The fact that she saw the display, though, meant that the communications entities of the stranger-Community were addressing her. Communities used their momentarily inactive organisms to shield communication from anyone outside themselves who was not being addressed.

She glanced at her employer and saw that its attention was focused away from her. It had no noticeable eyes, but its entities of vision served it very well whether she could see them or not. It had drawn itself together, made itself look more like a spiny stone than a bush. Communities did this when they wished to offer others privacy or simply disassociate themselves from the business being transacted.

Her employer had warned her that the job that would be offered to her would be unpleasant not only because of the usual hostility of the human beings she would face, but because the subcontractor for whom she would be working would be difficult. The subcontractor had had little contact with human beings. Its vocabulary in the painfully created common language that enabled humans and the Communities to speak to one another was, at best, rudimentary, as was its understanding of human abilities and limitations. Translation: by accident or by intent, the

subcontractor would probably hurt her.

Her employer had told her that she did not have to take this job, that it would support her if she chose

not to work for this subcontractor. It did not altogether approve of her decision to try for the job

anyway. Now it’s deliberate inattention had more to do with disassociation than with courtesy or privacy.

“You’re on your own,” its posture said, and she smiled. She could never have worked for it if it had not

been able to stand aside and let her make her own decisions. Yet it did not go about its business and

leave her alone with the stranger. It waited.

And here was the subcontractor signaling her with lightning.

Obediently, she went to it, stood close to it so that the tips of what looked like moss-covered outer

twigs and branches touched her bare skin. She wore only shorts and a halter top. The Communities

would have preferred her to be naked, and for the long years of her captivity, she had had no choice.

She had been naked. Now she was no longer a captive, and she insisted on wearing at least the basics.

Her employer had come to accept this and now refused to lend her to subcontractors who would refuse

her the right to wear clothing.

This subcontractor enfolded her immediately, drawing her upward

and in among its many selves, first

hauling her up with its various organisms of manipulation, then grasping her securely with what appeared

to be moss. The Communities were not plants, but it was easiest to think of them in those terms since

most of the time, most of them looked so plantlike.

Enfolded within the Community, she couldn't see at all. She closed her eyes to avoid the distraction

of trying to see or imagining that she saw. She felt herself surrounded by what felt like long, dry fibers,

fronds, rounded fruits of various sizes, and other things that produced less identifiable sensations. She

was at once touched, stroked, messaged, compressed in the strangely comfortable, peaceful way that

she had come to look forward to whenever she was employed. She was turned and handled as though

she weighed nothing. In fact, after a few moments, she felt weightless. She had lost all sense of direction,

yet she felt totally secure, clasped by entities that had nothing resembling human limbs. Why this was

pleasurable, she never understood, but for twelve years of captivity, it had been her only dependable

comfort. It had happened often enough to enable her to endure everything else that was done to her.

Fortunately, the Communities also found it comforting—even more than she did.

After a while, she felt the particular rhythm of quick warning

pressures across her back. The Communities liked the broad expanse of skin that the human back offered.

She made a beckoning motion with her right hand to let the Community know that she was paying attention.

There are six recruits, it signaled with pressures against her back. You will teach them.

I will, she signed, using her hands and arms only. The Communities liked her signs to be small, confined gestures when she was enfolded and large, sweeping hand, arm, and whole-body efforts when she was outside and not being touched. She had wondered at first if this was because they couldn't see very well. Now she knew that they could see far better than she could—could see over great distances with specialized entities of vision, could see most bacteria and some viruses, and see colors from ultraviolet through infrared.

In fact the reason that they preferred large gestures when she was out of contact and unlikely to hit or kick anyone was because they liked to watch her move. It was that simple, that odd. In fact, the Communities had developed a real liking for human dance performances and for some human sports

events—especially individual performances in gymnastics and ice skating.

The recruits are disturbed, the subcontractor said. They may be dangerous to one another.

Calm them.

I will try, Noah said. I will answer their questions and reassure them that they have nothing to

fear. Privately, she suspected that hate might be a more prevalent emotion than fear, but if the

subcontractor didn't know that, she wouldn't tell it.

Calm them. The subcontractor repeated. And she knew then that it meant, literally, "Change them

from disturbed people to calm, willing workers." The Communities could change one another just by

exchanging a few of their individual entities—as long as both exchanging communities were willing. Too

many of them assumed that human beings should be able to do something like this too, and that if they

wouldn't, they were just being stubborn.

Noah repeated, I will answer their questions and reassure them that they have nothing to fear.

That's all I can do.

Will they be calm?

She drew a deep breath, knowing that she was about to be hurt—twisted or torn, broken or stunned. Many Communities punished refusal to obey orders—as they saw it—less harshly than they punished what they saw as lying. In fact, the punishments were left over from the years when human beings were captives of uncertain ability, intellect, and perception. People were not supposed to be punished any longer, but of course they were. Now, Noah thought it was best to get whatever punishment there might be out of the way at once. She could not escape. She signed stolidly, Some of them may believe what I tell them and be calm. Others will need time and experience to calm them.

She was, at once, held more tightly, almost painfully—“held hard” as the Communities called it, held so that she could not move even her arms, could not harm any members of the Community by thrashing about in pain. Just before she might have been injured by the squeezing alone, it stopped.

She was hit with a sudden electrical shock that convulsed her. It drove the breath out of her in a hoarse scream. It made her see flashes of light even with her eyes tightly closed. It stimulated her muscles into abrupt, agonizing contortions.

Calm them, the Community insisted once again.

She could not answer at first. It took her a moment to get her now sore and shaking body under control and to understand what was being said to her. It took her a moment more to be able to flex her hands and arms, now free again, and finally to shape an answer—the only possible answer in spite of what it might cost.

I will answer their questions and reassure them that they have nothing to fear.

She was held hard for several seconds more, and knew that she might be given another shock. After a while, though, there were several flashes of light that she saw out of the corner of her eye, but that did not seem to have anything to do with her. Then without any more communication, Noah was passed into the care of her employer, and the subcontractor was gone.

She saw nothing as she was passed from darkness to darkness. There was nothing to hear but the usual rustle of Communities moving about. There was no change of scent, or if there was, her nose was not sensitive enough to detect it. Yet somehow, she had learned to know her employer's touch. She relaxed in relief.

Are you injured? her employer signed.

No, she answered. Just aching joints and other sore places. Did I get the job?

Of course you did. You must tell me if that subcontractor tries to coerce you again. It knows

better. I've told it that if it injures you, I will never allow you to work for it again.

Thank you.

There was a moment of stillness. Then the employer stroked her, calming her and pleasing itselves.

You insist on taking these jobs, but you can't use them to make the changes you want to make.

You know that. You cannot change your people or mine.

I can, a little, she signed. Community by Community, human by human. I would work faster if I

could.

And so you let subcontractors abuse you. You try to help your own people to see new

possibilities and understand changes that have already happened but most of them won't listen

and they hate you.

I want to make them think. I want to tell them what human governments won't tell them. I want to vote for peace between your people and mine by telling the truth. I don't know whether my efforts will do any good, in the long run, but I have to try.

Let yourself heal. Rest enfolded until the subcontractor returns for you.

Noah sighed, content, within another moment of stillness. Thank you for helping me, even though you don't believe.

I would like to believe. But you can't succeed. Right now groups of your people are looking for ways to destroy us.

Noah winced. I know. Can you stop them without killing them?

Her employer shifted her. Stroked her. Probably not, it signed. Not again.

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"Translator," Michelle Ota began as the applicants trailed into the meeting room, "do these … these things … actually understand that we're intelligent?"

She followed Noah into the meeting room, waited to see where Noah would sit, and sat next to her.

Noah noticed that Michelle Ota was one of only two of the six applicants who was willing to sit near her

even for this informal question-and-answer session. Noah had information that they needed. She was

doing a job some of them might wind up doing someday, and yet that job—translator and personnel

officer for the Communities—and the fact that she could do it was their reason for distrusting her. The

second person who wanted to sit near her was Sorrel Trent. She was interested in alien

spirituality—whatever that might be.

The four remaining job candidates choose to leave empty seats between themselves and Noah.

"Of course the Communities know we're intelligent," Noah said.

"I mean I know you work for them," Michelle Ota glanced at her, hesitated then went on. "I want to

work for them too. Because at least they're hiring. Almost nobody else is. But what do they think of us?"

"They'll be offering some of you contracts soon," Noah said. "They wouldn't waste time doing that if

they'd mistaken you for cattle." She relaxed back into her chair, watching some of the six other people in

the room get water, fruit or nuts from the sideboards. The food was good and clean and free to them

whether or not they were hired. It was also, she knew, the first food most of them had had that day.

Food was expensive and in these depressed times, most people were lucky to eat once a day. It pleased her to see them enjoying it. She was the one who had insisted there be food in the meeting rooms for the question and answer sessions.

She herself was enjoying the rare comfort of wearing shoes, long black cotton pants, and a colorful flowing tunic. And there was furniture designed for the human body—an upholstered armchair with a high back and a table she could eat from or rest her arms on. She had no such furniture in her quarters within the Mojave Bubble. She suspected that she could have at least the furniture now, if she asked her employer for it, but she had not asked, would not ask. Human things were for human places.

“But what does a contract mean to things that come from another star system?” Michelle Ota demanded.

Rune Johnsen spoke up. “Yes, it’s interesting how quickly these beings have taken up local, terrestrial ways when it suits them. Translator, do you truly believe they will consider themselves bound by anything they sign? Although without hands, God knows how they manage to sign anything.”

“They will consider both themselves and you bound by it if both they and you sign it,” Noah said.

“And, yes, they can make highly individual marks that serve as signatures. They spent a great deal of their time and wealth in this country with translators, lawyers, and politicians, working things out so that each Community was counted as a legal ‘person,’ whose individual mark would be accepted. And for twenty years since then, they’ve honored their contracts.”

Rune Johnsen shook his blond head. “In all, they’ve been on earth longer than I’ve been alive, and yet it feels wrong that they’re here. It feels wrong that they exist. I don’t even hate them, and still it feels wrong. I suppose that’s because we’ve been displaced again from the center of the universe. We human beings, I mean. Down through history, in myth and even in science, we’ve kept putting ourselves in the center, and then being evicted.”

Noah smiled, surprised and pleased. “I noticed the same thing. Now we find ourselves in a kind of sibling rivalry with the Communities. There is other intelligent life. The universe has other children. We knew it, but until they arrived here, we could pretend otherwise.”

“That’s crap!” another woman said. Thera Collier, her name was, a big, angry, red-haired young

woman. “The weeds came here uninvited, stole our land, and kidnapped our people,” She had been

eating an apple. She slammed it down hard on the table, crushing what was left of it, spattering juice.

“That’s what we need to remember. That’s what we need to do something about.”

“Do what?” Another woman asked. “We’re here to get jobs, not fight.”

Noah searched her memory for the new speaker’s name and found it. Piedad Ruiz—a small, brown

woman who spoke English clearly, but with a strong Spanish accent. She looked with her bruised face

and arms as though she had taken a fairly serious beating recently, but when Noah had asked her about it

before the group came into the meeting room, she held her head up and said she was fine and it was

nothing. Probably someone had not wanted her to apply for work at the bubble. Considering the rumors

that were sometimes spread about the Communities and why they hired human beings, that was not

surprising.

“What have the aliens told you about their coming here, Translator,” Rune Johnsen asked. He was,

Noah remembered from her reading of the short biography that had been given to her with his job

application, the son of a small businessman whose clothing store had not survived the depression brought

about by the arrival of the Communities. He wanted to look after his parents and he wanted to get married. Ironically, the answer to both those problems seemed to be to go to work for the Communities for a while. “You’re old enough to remember the things they did when they arrived,” he said. “What did they tell you about why they abducted people, killed people….”

“They abducted me,” Noah admitted.

That silenced the room for several seconds. Each of the six potential recruits stared at her, perhaps wondering or pitying, judging or worrying, perhaps even recoiling in horror, suspicion, or disgust. She had received all these reactions from recruits and from others who knew her history. People had never been able to be neutral about abductees. Noah tended to use her history as a way to start questions, accusations, and perhaps thought.

“Noah Cannon,” Rune Johnsen said, proving that he had at least been listening when she introduced herself. “I thought that name sounded familiar. You were part of the second wave of abductions. I remember seeing your name on the lists of abductees. I noticed it because you were listed as female. I had never run across a woman named Noah before.”

"So they kidnapped you, and now you work for them?" This was James Hunter Adio, a tall, lean, angry-looking young black man. Noah was black herself and yet James Adio had apparently decided the moment they met that he didn't like her. Now he looked not only angry, but disgusted.

"I was eleven when I was taken," Noah said. She looked at Rune Johnsen. "You're right. I was part of the second wave."

"So what, then, they experimented on you?" James Adio asked.

Noah met his gaze. "They did, yes. The people of the first wave suffered the most. The Communities didn't know anything about us. They killed some of us with experiments and dietary deficiency diseases and they poisoned others. By the time they snatched me, they at least knew enough not to kill me by accident."

"And what? You forgive them for what they did do?"

"Are you angry with me, Mr. Adio, or are you angry in my behalf?"

"I'm angry because I have to be here!" he said. He stood up and paced around the table—all the way around twice before he would sit down again. "I'm angry that these

things, these weeds can invade us,

wreck our economies, send the whole world into a depression just by showing up. They do whatever

they want to us, and instead of killing them, all I can do is ask them for a job!" And he needed the job

badly. Noah had read the information collected about him when he first applied to work for the

Communities. At twenty, James Adio was the oldest of seven children, and the only one who had

reached adulthood so far. He needed a job to help his younger brothers and sisters survive. Yet Noah

suspected that he would hate the aliens almost as much if they hired him as if they turned him down.

"How can you work for them?" Piedad Ruiz whispered to Noah. "They hurt you. Don't you hate

them? I think I'd hate them if it were me."

"They wanted to understand us and communicate with us," Noah said. "They wanted to know how

we got along with one another and they needed to know how much we could bear of what was normal

for them."

"Is that what they told you?" Thera Collier demanded. With one hand, she swept her smashed apple

off the table onto the floor, and then glared at Noah as though wishing she could sweep her away too.

Watching her, Noah realized that Thera Collier was a very frightened woman. Well, they were all

frightened, but Thera's fear made her lash out at people.

"The Communities did tell me that," Noah admitted, "but not until some of them and some of us, the surviving captives, had managed to put together a code—the beginnings of a language—that got communication started. Back when they captured me, they couldn't tell me anything."

Thera snorted. "Right. They can figure out how to cross light years of space, but they can't figure out how to talk to us without torturing us first!"

Noah allowed herself a moment of irritation. "You weren't there, Ms. Collier. It happened before you were born. And it happened to me, not to you." And it hadn't happened to anyone in Thera Collier's family either. Noah had checked. None of these people were relatives of abductees. It was important to know that since relatives sometimes tried to take revenge on translators when they realized they weren't going to be able to hurt the Communities.

"It happened to a lot of people," Thera Collier said. "And it shouldn't have happened to anyone."

Noah shrugged.

"Don't you hate them for what they did to you?" Piedad whispered. Whispering seemed to be her normal way of speaking.

"I don't," Noah said. "I did once, especially when they were beginning to understand us a little, and yet went right on putting us through hell. They were like human scientists experimenting with lab animals—not cruel, but very thorough."

"Animals again," Michelle Ota said. "You said they—"

"Then," Noah told her. "Not now."

"Why do you defend them?" Thera demanded. "They invaded our world. They tortured our people. They do whatever they please, and we aren't even sure what they look like."

Rune Johnsen spoke up, to Noah's relief. "What do they look like, Translator? You've seen them close up."

Noah almost smiled. What did the Communities look like. That was usually the first question asked in a group like this. People tended to assume, no matter what they had seen or heard from media sources,

that each Community was actually an individual being shaped like a big bush or tree or, more likely, that

the being was wearing shrubbery as clothing or as a disguise.

"They're not like anything that any of us have ever known," she told them. "I've heard them compared

to sea urchins—completely wrong. I've also heard they were like swarms of bees or wasps—also

wrong, but closer. I think of them as what I usually call them—Communities. Each Community contains

several hundred individuals—an intelligent multitude. But that's wrong too, really. The individuals can't

really survive independently, but they can leave one community and move temporarily or permanently to

another. They are products of a completely different evolution. When I look at them, I see what you've

all seen: outer branches and then darkness. Flashes of light and movement within. Do you want to hear

more?"

They nodded, sat forward attentively except for James Adio who leaned back with an expression of

contempt on his dark, smooth young face.

"The substance of the things that look like branches and the things that look like leaves and mosses

and vines is alive and made up of individuals. It only looks like a plant of some sort. The various entities

that we can reach from the outside feel dry, and usually smooth. One normal-sized Community might fill half of this room, but only weigh about six to eight hundred pounds. They aren't solid, of course, and within them, there are entities that I've never seen. Being enveloped by a community is like being held in a sort of … comfortable strait jacket, if you can imagine such a thing. You can't move much. You can't move at all unless the Community permits it. You can't see anything. There's no smell. Somehow, though, after the first time, it isn't frightening. It's peaceful and pleasant. I don't know why it should be, but it is."

"Hypnosis," James Adio said at once. "Or drugs!"

"Definitely not," Noah said. At least this was something she could be sure of. "That was one of the hardest parts of being a captive of the Communities. Until they got to know us, they didn't have anything like hypnosis or mood-altering drugs. They didn't even have the concept."

Rune Johnsen turned to frown at her. "What concept?"

"Altered consciousness. They don't even go unconscious unless they're sick or injured, and a whole Community never goes unconscious even though several of its entities might. As a result, Communities can't really be said to sleep—although at long last, they've accepted the reality that we have to sleep.

Inadvertently, we've introduced them to something brand new."

"Will they let us bring medicine in?" Michelle Ota asked suddenly. "I have allergies and I really need my medicine."

"They will allow certain medicines. If you're offered a contract, you'll have to write in the drugs you'll need. They will either allow you to have the drugs or you won't be hired. If what you need is allowed, you'll be permitted to order it from outside. The Communities will check to see that it is what it's supposed to be, but other than that, they won't bother you about it. Medicine's just about all you'll have to spend money on while you're inside. Room and board are part of the agreement, of course, and you won't be allowed to leave your employers until your contract is up."

"What if we get sick or have an accident?" Piedad demanded. "What if we need some medicine that isn't in the contract."

"Medical emergencies are covered by the contract," Noah said.

Thera slapped her palms down against the table and said loudly, "Screw all that!" She got the attention she wanted. Everyone turned to look at her. "I want to know more about you, and the weeds,

Translator. In particular, I want to know why you're still here, working for things that probably put you

through hell. Part of that no drug thing was no anesthetic when they hurt you, right?"

Noah sat still for a moment, remembering, yet not wanting to remember. "Yes," she said at last,

"except that most of the time, the people actually hurting me were other human beings. The aliens used to

lock groups of two or more of us up together for days or weeks to see what would happen. This was

usually not too bad. Sometimes, though, it went wrong. Some of us went out of our minds. Hell, all of us

went out of our minds at one time or another. But some of us were more likely than others to be violent.

Then there were those of us who would have been thugs even without the Communities' help. They were

quick enough to take advantage of any chance to exercise a little power, get a little pleasure by making

another person suffer. And some of us just stopped caring, stopped fighting, sometimes even stopped

eating. The pregnancies and several of the killings came from those cell-mate experiments. We called

them that.

"It was almost easier when the aliens just made us solve puzzles to get food or when they put things in

our food that made us sick or when they enfolded us and introduced some nearly lethal substance into

our bodies. The first captives got most of that, poor people. And some of them had developed a phobic terror of being enfolded. They were lucky if that was all they developed."

"My God," Thera said, shaking her head in disgust. After a while, she asked, "What happened to the babies? You said some people got pregnant."

"The Communities don't reproduce the way we do. It didn't seem to occur to them for a long time to take it easy on the pregnant women. Because of that, most women who got pregnant miscarried. Some had still births. Four of the women in the group that I was usually caged with between experiments died in childbirth. None of us knew how to help them." That was another memory she wanted to turn away from.

"There were a few live births, and of those, a few babies survived infancy, even though their mothers couldn't protect them from the worst and the craziest of our own people or from the Communities who were … curious about them. In all thirty-seven of the world's bubbles, fewer than a hundred such children survived. Most of those have grown up to be reasonably sane adults. Some live outside in secret, and some will never leave the bubbles. Their choice. A few of them are becoming the best of the next generation of translators."

Rune Johnsen made a wordless sound of interest. “I’ve read about such children,” he said.

“We tried to find some of them,” Sorrel Trent said, speaking up for the first time. “Our leader teaches that they’re the ones who will show us the way. They’re so important, and yet our stupid government keeps them hidden!” She sounded both frustrated and angry.

“The governments of this world have a great deal to answer for,” Noah said. “In some countries, the children won’t come out of the bubbles because word has gotten back to them about what’s happened to those who have come out. Word about disappearances, imprisonment, torture, death. Our government seems not to be doing that sort of thing any more. Not to the children, anyway. It’s given them new identities to hide them from groups who want to worship them or kill them or set them apart. I’ve checked on some of them myself. They’re all right, and they want to be let alone.”

“My group doesn’t want to hurt them,” Sorrel Trent said. “We want to honor them and help them fulfill their true destiny.”

Noah turned away from the woman, her mind filled with caustic, unprofessional things best not said.

"So the children at least, are able to have a little peace," she did say.

"Is one of them yours?" Thera asked, her voice uncharacteristically soft. "Do you have children?"

Noah stared at her, then leaned her head against the chair back again. "I got pregnant when I was

fifteen and again when I was seventeen. Miscarriages both times, thank God."

"It was … rape?" Rune Johnsen asked.

"Of course it was rape! Can you actually believe I'd want to give the Communities another human

infant to study?" She stopped and took a deep breath. After a moment, she said, "Some of the deaths

were women killed for resisting rape. Some of the deaths were rapists. Do you remember an old

experiment in which too many rats are caged together and they begin to kill one another."

"But you weren't rats," Thera said. "You were intelligent. You could see what the weeds were doing

to you. You didn't have to—"

Noah cut her off. "I didn't have to what?"

Thera backpedaled. "I didn't mean you personally. I just mean

human beings ought to be able to

behave better than a bunch of rats.”

“Many did. Some did not.”

“And in spite of all that, you work for the aliens. You forgive them because they didn’t know what

they were doing. Is that it?”

“They’re here,” Noah said flatly.

“They’re here until we find a way to drive them away!”

“They’re here to stay,” Noah said more softly. “There’s no ‘away’ for them—not for several

generations anyway. Their ship was a one-way transport. They’ve settled here and they’ll fight to keep

the various desert locations they’ve chosen for their bubbles. If they do decide to fight, we won’t survive.

They might be destroyed too, but chances are, they would send their young deep into the ground for a

few centuries. When they came up, this would be their world. We would be gone.” She looked at each

member of the group. “They’re here,” she said for the third time. “I’m one of maybe thirty people in this

country who can talk to them. Where else would I be but here at a bubble, trying to help the two species

understand and accept one another before one of them does

something fatal?"

Thera was relentless. "But do you forgive them for what they've done?"

Noah shook her head. "I don't forgive them," she said. "They haven't asked for my forgiveness and I wouldn't know how to give it if they did. And that doesn't matter. It doesn't stop me from doing my job. It doesn't stop them from employing me."

James Adio said, "If they're as dangerous as you believe, you ought to be working with the government, trying to find a way to kill them. Like you said, you know more about them than the rest of us."

"Are you here to kill them, Mr. Adio?" Noah asked quietly.

He let his shoulders slump. "I'm here to work for them, lady. I'm poor. I don't have all kinds of special knowledge that only thirty people in the whole country have. I just need a job."

She nodded as though he had simply been conveying information, as though his words had not carried heavy loads of bitterness, anger, and humiliation. "You can make money here." She said. "I'm

wealthy myself. I'm putting half a dozen nieces and nephews through college. My relatives eat three meals a day and live in comfortable homes. Why shouldn't yours?"

"Thirty pieces of silver," he muttered.

Noah gave him a tired smile. "Not for me," she said. "My parents seemed to have a completely different role in mind for me when they named me."

Rune Johnsen smiled but James Adio only stared at her with open dislike. Noah let her face settle into its more familiar solemnity. "Let me tell you all about my experience working with the government to get the better of the Communities," she said. "You should hear about it whether or not you choose to believe." She paused, gathered her thoughts.

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"I was held here in the Mojave Bubble from my eleventh year through my twenty-third," she began. "Of course, none of my family or friends knew where I was or whether I was alive. I just disappeared like a lot of other people. In my case, I disappeared from my own bedroom in my parents' house in Victorville late one night. Years later when the Communities could talk to us, when they understood more of what they'd done to us, they asked a group of us whether we would stay with them voluntarily or whether we wanted to leave. I thought it might have been just another of their

tests, but when I asked to go, they

agreed.

"In fact, I was the first to ask to go. The group I was with then was made up of people taken in

childhood—sometimes early childhood. Some of them were afraid to go out. They had no memory of

any home but the Mojave Bubble. But I remembered my family. I wanted to see them again. I wanted to

go out and not be confined to a small area in a bubble. I wanted to be free.

"But when the Communities let me go, they didn't take me back to Victorville. They just opened the

bubble late one night near one of the shanty towns that had grown up around its perimeters. The shanty

towns were wilder and cruder back then. They were made up of people who were worshipping the

Communities or plotting to wipe them out or hoping to steal some fragment of valuable technology from

them—that kind of thing. And some of the squatters there were undercover cops of one kind or another.

The ones who grabbed me said they were FBI, but I think now that they might have been bounty hunters.

In those days, there was a bounty on anyone or anything that came out of the bubbles, and it was my bad

luck to be the first person to be seen coming out of the Mojave Bubble.

"Anyone coming out might know valuable technological secrets, or

might be hypnotized saboteurs or disguised alien spies—any damned thing. I was handed over to the military which locked me up, questioned me relentlessly, accused me of everything from espionage to murder, from terrorism to treason. I was sampled and tested in every way they could think of. They convinced themselves that I was a valuable catch, that I had been collaborating with our “nonhuman enemies.” Therefore, I represented a great opportunity to find a way to get at them—at the Communities.

“Everything I knew, they found out. It wasn’t as though I was ever trying to hold anything back from them. The problem was, I couldn’t tell them the kind of thing they wanted to know. Of course the Communities hadn’t explained to me the workings of their technology. Why would they? I didn’t know much about their physiology either, but I told what I did know—told it over and over again with my jailers trying to catch me in lies. And as for the Communities’ psychology, I could only say what had been done to me and what I’d seen done to others. And because my jailers didn’t see that as very useful, they decided I was being uncooperative, and that I had something to hide.”

Noah shook her head. “The only difference between the way they treated me and the way the aliens treated me during the early years of my captivity was that the so-called human beings knew when they

were hurting me. They questioned me day and night, threatened me, drugged me, all in an effort to get me to give them information I didn't have. They'd keep me awake for days on end, keep me awake until I couldn't think, couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't. They couldn't get at the aliens, but they had me. When they weren't questioning me, they kept me locked up, alone, isolated from everyone but them."

Noah looked around the room. "All this because they knew—knew absolutely—that a captive who survived twelve years of captivity and who is then freed must be a traitor of some kind, willing or unwilling, knowing or unknowing. They x-rayed me, scanned me in every possible way, and when they found nothing unusual, it only made them angrier, made them hate me more. I was, somehow, making fools of them. They knew it! And I wasn't going to get away with it.

"I gave up. I decided that they were never going to stop, that they would eventually kill me anyway, and until they did, I would never know any peace."

She paused remembering humiliation, fear, hopelessness, exhaustion, bitterness, sickness, pain.... They had never beaten her badly—just struck a few blows now and then for emphasis and intimidation.

And sometimes she was grabbed, shaken, and shoved, amid ongoing accusations, speculations, and

threats. Now and then, an interrogator, knocked her to the floor, then ordered her back to her chair.

They did nothing that they thought might seriously injure or kill her. But it went on and on and on.

Sometimes one of them pretended to be nice to her, courted her in a sense, tried to seduce her into telling

secrets she did not know….

“I gave up,” she repeated. “I don’t know how long I’d been there when that happened. I never saw

the sky or sunlight so I lost all track of time. I just regained consciousness after a long session, found that

I was in my cell alone, and decided to kill myself. I had been thinking about it off and on when I could

think, and suddenly, I knew I would do it. Nothing else would make them stop. So I did do it. I hanged

myself.”

Piedad Ruiz made a wordless sound of distress, then stared downward at the table when people

looked at her.

“You tried to kill yourself?” Rune Johnsen asked. “Did you do that when you were with the … the

Communities?”

Noah shook her head. “I never did.” She paused. “It mattered more

than I know how to tell you that

this time my tormentors were my own people. They were human. They spoke my language. They knew

all that I knew about pain and humiliation and fear and despair. They knew what they were doing to me,

and yet it never occurred to them not to do it.” She thought for a moment, remembering. “Some captives

of the Communities did kill themselves. And the Communities didn’t care. If you wanted to die and

managed to hurt yourself badly enough, you’d die. They’d watch.”

But if you didn’t choose to die, there was the perverse security and peace of being enfolded. There

was, somehow, the pleasure of being enfolded. It happened often when captives were not being tested

in some way. It happened because the entities of the Communities discovered that it pleased and

comforted them too, and they didn’t understand why any more than she did. The first enfoldings

happened because they were convenient ways of restraining, examining, and, unhappily, poisoning human

captives. It wasn’t long, though, before unoccupied humans were being enfolded just for the pleasure the

act gave to an unoccupied Community. Communities did not understand at first that their captives could

also take pleasure in the act. Human children like Noah learned quickly how to approach a Community

and touch its outer branches to ask to be enfolded, although adult human captives had tried to prevent

the practice, and to punish it when they could not prevent it. Noah had had to grow up to even begin to

understand why adult captives sometimes beat children for daring to ask alien captors for comfort.

Noah had met her current employer before she turned twelve. It was one of the Communities who never injured her, one who had worked with her and with others to begin to assemble a language that both species could use.

She sighed and continued her narrative. “My human jailers were like the Communities in their attitude toward suicide,” she said. “They watched too as I tried to kill myself. I found out later that there were at least three cameras on me day and night. A lab rat had more privacy than I did. They watched me make a noose of my clothing. They watched me climb onto my bed and tie off the noose to a grill that protected the speaker they sometimes used to blast me with loud, distorted music or with old news broadcasts from when the aliens first arrived and people were dying in the panic.

“They even watched me step off my bed and dangle by my neck, strangling. Then they got me out of there, revived me, made sure I wasn’t seriously injured. That done, they put me back in my cell, naked and with the speaker recess concreted over and the grill gone. At least, after that there was no more horrible music. No more terrified screaming.

“But the questioning began again. They even said I hadn’t really meant to kill myself, that I was just making a bid for sympathy.

“So I left in mind, if not in body. I sort of went catatonic for a while. I wasn’t entirely unconscious, but I wasn’t functioning any more. I couldn’t. They knocked me around at first because they thought I was faking. I know they did that because later I had some unexplained and untreated broken bones and other medical problems to deal with.

“Then someone leaked my story. I don’t know who. Maybe one of my interrogators finally grew a conscience. Anyway, someone started telling the media about me and showing them pictures. The fact that I was only eleven when I was taken turned out to be important to the story. At that point, my captors decided to give me up. I suppose they could have killed me just as easily. Considering what they had been doing to me, I have no idea why they didn’t kill me. I’ve seen the pictures that got published. I was in bad shape. Maybe they thought I’d die—or at least that I’d never wake all the way up and be normal again. And, too, once my relatives learned that I was alive, they got lawyers and fought to get me out of there.

“My parents were dead—had died in a car wreck while I was still a captive in the Mojave Bubble. My jailers must have known, but they never said a word. I didn’t find out until I began to recover and one of my uncles told me. My uncles were my mother’s three older brothers. They were the ones who fought for me. To get me, they had to sign away any rights they may have had to sue. They were told that the Communities were the ones who had injured me. They believed it until I revived enough to tell them what really happened.

“After I told them, they wanted to tell the world, maybe put a few people in prison where they belonged. If they hadn’t had families of their own, I might not have been able to talk them out of it. They were good men. My mother was their baby sister, and they’d always loved her and looked after her. As things were, though, they had had to go into serious debt to get me free, repaired and functional again. I couldn’t have lived with the thought that because of me, they lost everything they owned, and maybe even got sent to prison on some fake charge.

“When I’d recovered a little, I had to do some media interviews. I told lies, of course, but I couldn’t go along with the big lie. I refused to confirm that the Communities had injured me. I pretended not to remember what had happened. I said I had been in such bad shape that I didn’t have any idea what was

going on most of the time, and that I was just grateful to be free and healing. I hoped that was enough to

keep my human ex-captors content. It seemed to be.

“The reporters wanted to know what I was going to do, now that I was free.

“I told them I would go to school as soon as I could. I would get an education, then a job so that I

could begin to pay my uncles back for all they had done for me.

“That’s pretty much what I did. And while I was in school, I realized what work I was best fitted to

do. So here I am. I was not only the first to leave the Mojave Bubble, but the first to come back to offer

to work for the Communities. I had a small part in helping them connect with some of the lawyers and

politicians I mentioned earlier.”

“Did you tell your story to the weeds when you came back here?” Thera Collier asked suspiciously.

“Prison and torture and everything?”

Noah nodded. “I did. Some Communities asked and I told them. Most didn’t ask. They have

problems enough among themselves. What humans do to other humans outside their bubbles is usually

not that important to them."

"Do they trust you?" Thera asked. "Do the weeds trust you?"

Noah smiled unhappily. "At least as much as you do, Ms. Collier."

Thera gave a short bark of laughter, and Noah realized the woman had not understood. She thought Noah was only being sarcastic.

"I mean they trust me to do my job," Noah said. "They trust me to help would-be employers learn to live with a human being without hurting the human and to help human employees learn to live with the Communities and fulfill their responsibilities. You trust me to do that too. That's why you're here." That was all true enough, but there were also some Communities—her employer and a few others—who did seem to trust her. And she trusted them. She had never dared to tell anyone that she thought of these as friends.

Even without that admission, Thera gave her a look that seemed to be made up of equal parts pity and contempt.

"Why did the aliens take you back," James Adio demanded. "You could have been bringing in a gun

or a bomb or something. You could have been coming back to get even with them for what they'd done to you."

Noah shook her head. "They would have detected any weapon I could bring in. They let me come back because they knew me and they knew I could be useful to them. I knew I could be useful to us, too. They want more of us. Maybe they even need more of us. Better for everyone if they hire us and pay us instead of snatching us. They can take mineral ores from deeper in the ground than we can reach, and refine them. They've agreed to restrictions on what they take and where they take it. They pay a handsome percentage of their profit to the government in fees and taxes. With all that, they still have plenty of money to hire us."

She changed the subject suddenly. "Once you're in the bubble, learn the language. Make it clear to your employers that you want to learn. Have you all mastered the basic signs?" She looked them over, not liking the silence. Finally she asked, "Has anyone mastered the basic signs?"

Rune Johnsen and Michelle Ota both said, "I have."

Sorrel Trent said, "I learned some of it, but it's hard to remember."

The others said nothing. James Adio began to look defensive. “They come to our world and we have to learn their language,” he muttered.

“I’m sure they would learn ours if they could, Mr. Adio,” Noah said wearily. “In fact, here at Mojave, they can read English, and even write it—with difficulty. But since they can’t hear at all, they never developed a spoken language of any kind. They can only converse with us in the gesture and touch language that some of us and some of them have developed. It takes some getting used to since they have no limbs in common with us. That’s why you need to learn it from them, see for yourself how they move and feel the touch-signs on your skin when you’re enfolded. But once you learn it, you’ll see that it works well for both species.”

“They could use computers to speak for them,” Thera Collier said. “If their technology isn’t up to it, they could buy some of ours.”

Noah did not bother to look at her. “Most of you won’t be required to learn more than the basic signs,” she said. “If you have some urgent need that the basics don’t cover, you can write notes. Print in block capital letters. That will usually work. But if you want to move up a paygrade or two and be given

work that might actually interest you, learn the language.”

“How do you learn,” Michelle Ota asked. “Are there classes?”

“No classes. Your employers will teach you if they want you to know—or if you ask. Language

lessons are the one thing you can ask for that you can be sure of getting. They’re also one of the few

things that will get your pay reduced if you’re told to learn and you don’t. That will be in the contract.

They won’t care whether you won’t or you can’t. Either way it’s going to cost you.”

“Not fair,” Piedad said.

Noah shrugged. “It’s easier if you have something to do anyway, and easier if you can talk with your

employer. You can’t bring in radios, televisions, computers, or recordings of any kind. You can bring in a

few books—the paper kind—but that’s all. Your employers can and will call you at any time, sometimes

several times in a day. Your employer might lend you to … relatives who haven’t hired one of us yet.

They might also ignore you for days at a time, and most of you won’t be within shouting distance of

another human being.” Noah paused, stared down at the table. “For the sake of your sanity, go in with

projects that will occupy your minds.”

Rune said, “I would like to hear your description of our duties. What I read sounded almost impossibly simple.”

“It is simple. It’s even pleasant once you’re used to it. You will be enfolded by your employer or anyone your employer designates. If both you and the Community enfolding you can communicate, you might be asked to explain or discuss some aspect of our culture that the Community either doesn’t understand or wants to hear more about. Some of them read our literature, our history, even our news. You may be given puzzles to solve. When you’re not enfolded, you may be sent on errands—after you’ve been inside long enough to be able to find your way around. Your employer might sell your contract to another Community, might even send you to one of the other bubbles. They’ve agreed not to send you out of the country, and they’ve agreed that when your contract is up, they’ll let you leave by way of the Mojave Bubble—since this is where you’ll begin. You won’t be injured. There’ll be no bio-medical experiments, none of the nastier social experiments that captives endured. You’ll receive all the food, water, and shelter that you need to keep you healthy. If you get sick or injured, you have the right to see a human physician. I believe there are two human doctors working here at Mojave now.” She paused and James Adio spoke up.

"So what will we be, then?" he demanded. "Whores or house pets?"

Thera Collier made a noise that was almost a sob.

Noah smiled humorlessly. "We're neither, of course. But you'll probably feel as though you're both unless you learn the language. We are one interesting and unexpected thing, though." She paused. "We're an addictive drug." She watched the group and recognized that Rune Johnsen had already known this.

And Sorrel Trent had known. The other four were offended and uncertain and shocked.

"This effect proves that humanity and the Communities belong together," Sorrel Trent said. "We're fated to be together. They have so much to teach us."

Everyone ignored her.

"You told us they understood that we were intelligent," Michelle Ota said.

"Of course they understand," Noah said. "But what's important to them is not what they think of our intellect. It's what use we can be to them. That's what they pay us for."

“We’re not prostitutes!” Piedad Ruiz said. “We’re not! There’s no sex in any of this. There can’t be.

And there are no drugs either. You said so yourself!”

Noah turned to look at her. Piedad didn’t listen particularly well, and she lived in terror of

prostitution, drug addiction, disease, anything that might harm her or steal her ability to have the family

she hoped for. Her two older sisters were already selling themselves on the streets. She hoped to rescue

them and herself by getting work with the Communities.

“No sex,” Noah agreed. “And we are the drugs. The Communities feel better when they enfold us.

We feel better too. I guess that’s only fair. The ones among them who are having trouble adjusting to this

world are calmed and much improved if they can enfold one of us now and then.” She thought for a

moment. “I’ve heard that for human beings, petting a cat lowers our blood pressure. For them, enfolding

one of us calms them and eases what translates as a kind of intense biological homesickness.”

“We ought to sell them some cats,” Thera said. “Neutered cats so they’ll have to keep buying them.”

“Cats and dogs don’t like them,” Noah said. “As a matter of fact, cats and dogs won’t like you after

you’ve lived in the bubble for a while. They seem to smell something on you that we can’t detect. They

panic if you go near them. They bite and scratch if you try to handle them. The effect lasts for a month or two. I generally avoid house pets and even farm animals for a couple of months when I go out.”

“Is being enveloped anything like being crawled over by insects?” Piedad asked. “I can’t stand having things crawl on me.”

“It isn’t like any experience you’ve ever had,” Noah said. “I can only tell you that it doesn’t hurt and it isn’t slimy or disgusting in any way. The only problem likely to be triggered by it is claustrophobia. If any of you had been found to be claustrophobic, you would have been culled by now. For the non-claustrophobic, well, we’re lucky they need us. It means jobs for a lot of people who wouldn’t otherwise have them.”

“We’re the drug of choice, then?” Rune said. And he smiled.

Noah smiled back. “We are. And they have no history of drug taking, no resistance to it, and apparently no moral problems with it. All of a sudden they’re hooked. On us.”

James Adio said, “Is this some kind of payback for you, Translator? You hook them on us because of what they did to you.”

Noah shook her head. “No payback. Just what I said earlier. Jobs. We get to live, and so do they. I don’t need payback.”

He gave her a long, solemn look. “I would,” he said. “I do. I can’t have it, but I want it. They invaded us. They took over.”

“God, yes,” Noah said. “They’ve taken over big chunks of the Sahara, the Atacama, the Kalahari the Mojave and just about every other hot, dry wasteland they could find. As far as territory goes, they’ve taken almost nothing that we need.”

“They’ve still got no right to it,” Thera said. “It’s ours, not theirs.”

“They can’t leave,” Noah said.

Thera nodded. “Maybe not. But they can die!”

Noah ignored this. “Some day maybe a thousand of years from now, some of them will leave. They’ll build and use ships that are part multigenerational and part sleeper. A few Communities stay awake and keep things running. Everyone else sort of hibernates.” This was a vast oversimplification of the aliens’

travel habits, but it was essentially true. “Some of us might even wind up going with them. It would be one

way for the human species to get to the stars.”

Sorrel Trent said wistfully, “If we honor them, maybe they will take us to heaven with them.”

Noah suppressed an urge to hit the woman. To the others, she said, “The next two years will be as

easy or as difficult as you decide to make them. Keep in mind that once the contract is signed, the

Communities won’t let you go because you’re angry with them or because you hate them or even because

you try to kill them. And by the way, although I’m sure they can be killed, that’s only because I believe

anything that’s alive can die. I’ve never seen a dead Community, though. I’ve seen a couple of them have

what you might call internal revolution. The entities of those Communities scattered to join other

Communities. I’m not sure whether that was death, reproduction, or both.” She took a deep breath and

let it out. “Even those of us who can talk fluently with the Communities don’t understand their physiology

that well.”

“Finally, I want to tell you a bit of history. When I’ve done that, I’ll I escort you in and introduce you

to your employers.”

"Are we all accepted, then?" Rune Johnsen asked.

"Probably not," Noah said. "There's a final test. When you go in, you will be enfolded, each of you,

by a potential employer. When that's over, some of you will be offered a contract and the rest will be

given the thanks-for-stopping-by fee that anyone who gets this far and no farther is given."

"I had no idea the … enfolding … would happen so soon," Rune Johnsen said. "Any pointers?"

"About being enfolded?" Noah shook her head. "None. It's a good test. It lets you know whether

you can stand the Communities and lets them know whether they really want you."

Piedad Ruiz said, "You were going to tell us something—something from history."

"Yes." Noah leaned back in her chair. "It isn't common knowledge. I looked for references to it while

I was in school, but I never found any. Only my military captors and the aliens seemed to know about it.

The aliens told me before they let me go. My military captors gave me absolute hell for knowing.

"It seems that there was a coordinated nuclear strike at the aliens when it was clear where they were

establishing their colonies. The armed forces of several countries had tried and failed to knock them out

of the sky before they landed. Everyone knows that. But once the Communities established their bubbles,

they tried again. I was already a captive inside the Mojave bubble when the attack came. I have no idea

how that attack was repelled, but I do know this, and my military captors confirmed it with their lines of

questioning: the missiles fired at the bubbles never detonated. They should have, but they didn't. And

sometime later, exactly half of the missiles that had been fired were returned. They were discovered

armed and intact, scattered around Washington DC in the White House—one in the Oval Office—in the

capitol, in the Pentagon. In China, half of the missiles fired at the Gobi Bubbles were found scattered

around Beijing. London and Paris got one half of their missiles back from the Sahara and Australia. There

was panic, confusion, fury. After that, though, the "invaders," the "alien weeds" began to become in many

languages, our "guests," our "neighbors," and even our "friends."

"Half the nuclear missiles were … returned?" Piedad Ruiz whispered.

Noah nodded. "Half, yes."

"What happened to the other half?"

“Apparently, the Communities still have the other half—along with whatever weapons they brought with them and any they’ve built since they’ve been here.”

Silence. The six looked at one another, then at Noah.

“It was a short, quiet war,” Noah said. “We lost.”

Thera Collier stared at her bleakly. “But … but there must be something we can do, some way to fight.”

Noah stood up, pushed her comfortable chair away. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Your employers are waiting. “Shall we join them?”

The End